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MODERN LANGUAGE NOTES.

Baltimore, April, 1893.

'NATHAN DER WEISE'—Poem or Play?

THE question we raise is not new. It is as old as 'Nathan' itself. Is Lessing's last and greatest work a drama, or merely a dramatic poem in which the author preaches toleration and good morals? Is it a fine bit of popular theology suited to the time and to all times, or a final dramatic effort worthy of the Father of the German Stage?

The critics are divided on this question, while they agree in their sincere admiration of the work as an undisputed masterpiece of Modern German Literature. Engel, Schiller, Friedrich Schlegel, Vilmar, W. Meyer, Rötscher,[1] and Kuno Fischer,[2] among others, contend, with different degrees of emphasis, that "nicht die Handlung sondern die Idee ist im 'Nathan' die Hauptsache." Lowell, in his well-known essay on Lessing,[3] goes so far as to call 'Nathan' an "Essay on Toleration, in the form of a dialogue." Assuming as a definition of drama the development of human character through action, these critics point out that 'Nathan' cannot possibly come under this head, since the characters are not evolved from the action; but on the contrary, neither characters nor action can be understood except in their relation to the great truths which the poet is endeavoring to teach.

"Die ganze Anlage und Gruppirung der Charactere, die ganze Verwicklung, selbst die Liebesgeschichte zwischen dem Tempelherrn und Recha, wo am Ende Deist, Jude, Mahomedaner, Christ, alle als Glieder *einer* Familie erscheinen, kurz, das ganze Werk in jedem seiner Teile, zielt ganz sichtbar auf die grossen Wahrheiten ab, die uns der Dichter lehren will."[4]

Kuno Fischer, perhaps, is the most impartial and conservative of this class of critics. Yet he, too, starts with the assumption that not the action but the thought is the centre of the work. His criticisms on the plot are very sharp, and he finds no unity in the action which is episodic and disjointed. He finds his key to the characters and to the work as a whole, not in the plot, but in the central idea as developed in the Ring Story: "die Wiedervereinigung der aus ihren Religionen geläutert hervorgegangenen Menschheit." To symbolize this truth is the object of the action which brings together, rather mysteriously,

"geläuterte Charactere der drei einander feindlichen Religionen die nach langer Trennung sich in *einer* Familie zusammenfinden, in deren kleinem Umfange jene Wiedervereinigung vorweg genommen wird."

Thus, not only the characters, but the action itself is shown to be but a demonstration of the central truth of the work, as set forth in the Ring Story.

But there are not lacking those who take an opposite view. Herder and A. W. Schlegel spoke with warm appreciation of the dramatic excellencies of the play. More modern advocates of this side of the question are Guhrauer, Stahr and Düntzer. These critics all point to

"die schöne dramatische Entwicklung der Haupthandlung die sich nicht als Beiwerk oder blosse Einkleidung einer theoretischen Lehre ergibt, sondern dem Drama sein eigentliches Leben leiht; die ganze Handlung dient dazu, das Characterbild Nathans im hellsten Glanz erstrahlen zu lassen."[5]

Düntzer is especially warm in his defense of 'Nathan' as drama.

"Wie sehr es dem Dichter gelungen, das Drama zu einem gerundeten organischen Ganzen zu gestalten, worin alles an seiner Stelle, in sich gegründet und das Weitere begründend erscheint, wie herrlich alles in einander gefügt ist zu einer lebendig spannenden und mächtig hinreissenden Handlung, kann nur der erkennen der das Stück von Schritt zu Schritt verfolgt,"[6] etc.

A great point in Düntzer's plea, is the personal interest we feel in all of the characters, and our concern for their fate.

1 See their views as quoted in Düntzer's 'Erläuterungen zu den deutschen Klassikern: Nathan der Weise,' pp. 17–34.

2 Kuno Fischer, 'Lessing als Reformator der deutschen Literatur,' Zweiter Teil, Nathan der Weise, ed. 1881, p. 88. For following quotation, see also p. 77.

3 'Among my Books,' ed. 1883, p. 344.

4 Engel, 'Anfangsgründe einer Theorie der Dichtarten.' Quoted in Düntzer, *ibid.*, p. 17.

5 Düntzer, *ibid.*, p. 24. 6 *Op. cit.* p. 53.

"Der Dichter lässt uns seinen Personen auf den Grund der Seele schauen, so dass wir uns überall angezogen und festgehalten fühlen." (p. 53).

Truly, this is not a common characteristic of the ordinary lay-figures in didactic poems. Again, Hettner[7] points out, as Herder had already done, how the rapid action contributes to form the image of 'Nathan' himself, in whom are incorporated the principles of the religion which he himself sets forth in the Ring Story, and whose own action is the fruit of his faith. According to this view, then, the action does not merely symbolize an idea, but it serves to develop a character who himself embodies this idea. Thus, 'Nathan' is in a true sense not a *Lehrgedicht*, much less "an essay in the form of a dialogue," but a real drama.

Certainly there is cause here for contention. There evidently coexist in 'Nathan' two elements which are rarely found together: *theoretische Lehre* and *dramatische Handlung*. According as we lay emphasis upon the one or the other of these two elements, we shall feel inclined to call 'Nathan' a poem or a play. On the one hand, we might point out that it is not so much the function of the drama to teach us lessons in morals as it is to purify our passions; that thus a drama cannot in any sense become didactic without losing its right to the name. On the other hand, we could show that sentiments may be developed in characters through action, so as to yield something more than a poem or essay.

But it is not our purpose to discuss a delicate question in criticism which would lead to nothing, and cause us to lose sight of the main interest in the discussion. Instead, let us concede the difficulty, and endeavor to explain it. 'Nathan der Weise' is neither poem nor play, but poem and play. That is, it has in it the essential elements of a drama, and is, at the same time, didactic in its tone and bent. The evidence, we believe, all points to this conclusion, and such a view of the subject may set us in a better way to understand the real spirit of the work than any attempt to classify it rudely as either drama or poem. Let us consider, then, briefly, first the genius of its author, second the genesis of 'Nathan' itself, and finally the qualities of the work as it is.

7 Quoted in Düntzer, *ibid.*, p. 32.

I. The quality of a man's genius, of course, alone explains the product of his mind. With Lessing, the creative and critical impulse worked in unison. His criticism is best appreciated when read in connection with his dramas, and his dramas can only be understood, when studied in the light of his criticism. 'Minna von Barnhelm' is the product of Lessing's study of Diderot and the *genre* of the domestic drama. The strong and weak points in that powerful but defective attempt at a drama, 'Emilia Galotti,' seem plain enough when we have penetrated into Lessing's theory of the function of tragedy as expounded in his letters to Nicolai and Mendelssohn, and in the Dramaturgy. Lessing was neither an infallible critic, nor a great poet. Heine has well stated Lessing's essential weakness as critic:

"Strong as Lessing is in negation, he is equally weak in affirmation; seldom can he lay down any fundamental principle, and even more rarely a correct one. He lacks the firm foundation of a synthetic system."[8]

Only the over-enthusiastic admirers, too, of Lessing will disagree with Lowell, when he declares that Lessing was not a poetic genius.

"His mind kindled by friction in the process of thinking, not in the flash of conception, and its delight is in demonstration, not in bodying forth."[9]

Herein lies Lessing's weakness as a dramatist, that his creations, are, after all, but a positive emphasis of his criticism. Lessing is great as critic *and* poet, not as critic *or* poet.[10] We have touched upon the source of his weakness, and we have discovered at the same time the secret of his strength. Lessing is an original genius; and his genius is seen in the rare union of the two instincts, creative and critical, rather than in the superiority of either.

These general remarks on the character of Lessing's thought will serve as an introduction to a close study of the play itself. 'Nathan' is the last, and, in many respects, the greatest of Lessing's works. In it, we see the com-

8 'Romantische Schule,' ed. 1868, p. 43.

9 'Among my Books,' ed. 1883, p. 342.

10 Kuno Fischer, 'Lessing als Reformator,' i. Teil, pp. 55ff.

pletest illustration of the peculiarity of his genius. Both sides of his thought are equally represented. Lessing the dramatist, and Lessing the critic have both contributed in its composition.

II. In considering the genesis of 'Nathan der Weise,' we will limit our discussion to the relative importance, in its composition, of Lessing's early conception of the drama, and of his later theological disputes. Commonly, 'Nathan' is considered to be a natural continuation of the eleventh Anti-Goeze. This is doubtless an exaggerated view. Pecuniary reasons, the natural awakening of Lessing's creative faculty after a period of criticism,[11] and his desire to come back once more to "his old pulpit, the stage,"[12] probably have as much to do with the writing of the play, as any desire to "play the theologians a vexatious game." We must remember that the paper-war with Goeze had come to a stand-still, that the twelfth Anti-Goeze remained unpublished. Lessing turned from these polemical debates for recreation, rather than with a view to resume the battle, to old dramatic material which is naturally suggested to him at this time by its analogy with his controversies with Goeze. A conservative criticism places Lessing's first conception of the play about the time of his Italian journey, although he had sketched a similar polemico-religious drama as early as 1754. The following well-known extracts from Lessing's letters will bring out the points which are of importance in this connection:—

1. An Karl Lessing, den 11. August 1778: . . . ; "da habe ich diese vergangene Nacht einen närrischen Einfall gehabt. Ich habe vor vielen Jahren ein Schauspiel entworfen, dessen Inhalt eine Art von Analogie mit meinen gegenwärtigen Streitigkeiten hat, die ich mir damals wohl nicht träumen liess. . . . . Ich glaube eine sehr interessante Episode dazu erfunden zu haben, dass sich alles sehr gut soll lesen lassen, und ich gewiss den Theologen einen ärgern Possen damit spielen will als noch mit zehn Fragmenten."

11 "Der Kritiker erweckte den Dichter." Kuno Fischer, *ibid.*, p. 4.

12 From a letter to Elise Reimarus, quoted in Sime's 'Life of Lessing.' Vol. ii, p. 235. Cf. the following words of Heine: "Die Kunst war für Lessing ebenfalls eine Tribüne, und wenn man ihn von der Kanzel abstiess, dann sprang er aufs Theater, und sprach dort noch viel deutlicher und gewann sich ein noch zahlreicheres Publikum."

It is interesting to observe how the dramatic and critical impulses of the author are alive at once. His attention was originally called to the dramatic possibilities of Boccaccio's story without any thoughts of the part it was to play in his theological debates. And when Lessing finally takes it up, struck with the use he can make of it, it still appeals to him as interesting dramatic material.

2. An Karl Lessing, den 7. November 1778: "Mein Nathan . . . ist ein Stück, welches ich schon vor drey Jahren, gleich nach meiner Zurückkunft von der Reise, vollends auf's Reine bringen und drucken lassen wollen. Ich habe es jetzt nur wieder vorgesucht, weil mir auf einmal beyfiel, dass ich, nach einigen kleinen Veränderungen des Plans, dem Feinde auf einer andern Seite damit in die Flanke fallen könne."

It would appear plain then, beyond possibility of contradiction, that the play was fully sketched and planned three years before Lessing had ever heard of Goeze. Whether any parts of the play as originally conceived were written down or not, is a matter of conjecture; this does not seem improbable, considering Lessing's habit of sketching his plays in full before beginning to finish any part of them.

3. An Herder, den 10. Jenner 1779: "Ich will hoffen dass Sie weder den Propheten Nathan noch eine Satire auf Goezen erwarten . . . Introite et hic Dii sunt."

This utterance, coupled with the following from 2—from which we have already quoted: "Mein Stück hat mit unsern jetzigen Schwarzröcken nichts zu thun,"—shows plainly that Lessing was on a higher plane than his friends supposed. His evident desire is to give them an idea of the depth and breadth of the subject he has on his hands. The following extracts confirm this impression:

4. An Karl Lessing, den 18. April 1779: "Es kann sein, dass mein Nathan im Ganzen wenig Wirkung thun würde wenn es auf das Theater käme, welches wohl nie geschehen wird. Genug, wenn es sich mit Interesse nur lieset, und unter tausend Lesern nur Einer daraus an der Evidenz und Allgemeinheit seiner Religion zweifeln lernt."

5. An Jacobi, den 18. Mai 1779: "Nathan ist ein Sohn seines [Lessing writes in the third person] eintretenden Alters, den die Polemik entbinden helfen."

6. An Karl Lessing, den 20. Oktober 1778:

"Jetzt ist man hier auf meinen Nathan gespannt, und besorgt sich davon, ich weiss nicht was. Aber, lieber Bruder, selbst Du hast Dir eine ganz unrechte Idee davon gemacht. Es wird nichts weniger, als ein satirisches Stück, um den Kampfplatz mit Hohngelächter zu verlassen. Es wird ein so rührendes Stück, als ich nur immer gemacht habe. . . . . "

This extract has purposely been set out of its chronological order. It is evident that Lessing had no idea, even at the first, of writing a satire or wholly didactic composition.

The points definitely determined, then, by these extracts from Lessing's correspondence, are these:

1. That the drama was originally planned with no thoughts of pointing a particular truth. The general subject of toleration was, of course, in Lessing's mind, as it was the real point to Boccaccio's story;[13] but it was the *dramatic* possibilites of the fable which, according to Lessing's own statement, attracted his attention.

2. That the play was afterwards so altered that, without degenerating into a mere polemic, it was designed to teach a lesson.

3. That the play in so far lost its dramatic *form* that Lessing himself thought it unfit for the stage, and himself called it a "dramatisches Gedicht."[14] It is possible that, later, Lessing had hopes that the play might be presented. But he evidently recognized that he had not followed, in its composition, the ordinary dramatic rules, as he himself understood them.

4. That the didactic element, while it modified the dramatic form of the play, did not, according to Lessing's own view, destroy its dramatic spirit.

To call the play a perfectly constructed drama, then, is to misunderstand Lessing's powers and to contradict all evidence furnished by the history of the play itself. To deny the dramatic spirit of the work, is to do a similar injustice to Lessing, and like violence to fact. Is it altogether fanciful to suppose that Lessing reverted to the original play, with hard thoughts of the use he might make of it against his enemies; but as he worked and pondered, his thoughts inevitably mellowed and broadened, the old dramatic instinct awoke, and the play received that spirit of toleration and that dramatic coloring, which give it both dignity and movement, repose and life? 'Nathan' would certainly lose its chief charm if it is considered as pure drama, or held to be a mere "Essay on Toleration in the form of a dialogue." As it stands, the play is one of the most interesting bits of work in its history and construction to be found in modern German literature. It is the best expression of the genius of one of the greatest and most original of German thinkers.

III. Finally, we must examine the qualities of the play itself, to determine how the dramatic and didactic elements are combined. We have seen that the critics have emphasized the one element or the other, the more or less they have been disposed to regard the work as real drama. Kuno Fischer's argument[15] may be summarized as follows:

The essential feature of Lessing's treatment of the fable of the Ring is, that he causes the true ring to disappear. For the father expressly states that he himself cannot distinguish between the true ring and the two false rings:

> "Das gelingt
> Dem Künstler. Da er ihm die Ringe bringt,
> Kann selbst der Vater seinen Musterring nicht unterscheiden."

Impossible, therefore, for the judge to decide between the three sons, since all three rings have apparently the same value:

> "O so seid ihr alle drei
> Betrogene Betrüger! Eure Ringe
> Sind alle drei nicht echt."

This is the negative decision. There follows a positive judgment which is pronounced not as a legal sentence, but in the form of advice. Their rings are a proof of the love they bore their father, the reward of their obedience. Let them then cease to believe in any magic virtue in their rings; let the same faith which gave them confidence in the efficacy of the rings come to their aid, and help them win the love of God and of their fellowmen, as they had already earned the love of their father, by

13 Kuno Fischer, *ibid*, p. 42.

14 Düntzer's explanation of this seems forced; see *Op. Cit.*, pp. 60–63.

15 *Op. Cit.*, pp. 77–157.

an unselfish, peaceful and consecrated life. Thus a later day will come, when a wiser judge will show them that their rings as outward symbols of their father's love are no longer necessary, and they will be united in peace and harmony.

According to Fischer, too, the Ring Story as thus interpreted occupies a central position, and the action and the characters are explained in the light of this one thought. The plot consists in the bringing together of representatives of the three hostile religions. The union of Saladin and Nathan, Recha and the Tempelherr symbolizes thus the future oneness of humanity which shall have outgrown religious forms. Fischer finds that the action, as thus explained, contains much that is incongruous and well-nigh incredible, besides being loose and dramatically weak. As with the action, so with the characters. These are not developed by the action, but are portrayed with reference to the central idea as expounded in the Ring Story.

"Es handelt sich zwischen echtem und unechtem Glauben, Wesen und Schein, Religion und Ring: das Thema der Parabel ist auch das Thema der Charactere im 'Nathan,' der Schlüssel zu ihrem Verhältniss," (p. 91.).

The characters are thus types, and the play becomes a "dramatisches Gemälde religiöser Charactere," (p. 93). These are arranged in an ascending scale, according as they represent the essence of religion as opposed to mere outward appearance. Nathan himself stands at the head. "Der Character steht vor uns auf den die anderen wie in einer Stufenleiter hinweisen," (p. 158).

We have already shown why such an interpretation seems unsatisfactory. The dramatic element is almost lost sight of. The action is but a weak dramatization of the thought and contributes little or nothing to the effectiveness of the work as a whole. But such a conclusion does not agree with what we know of Lessing's dramatic genius, and of the history of the play.

Düntzer's interpretation is even more unsatisfactory.[16] He starts with the assumption that the Ring Story is not the centre of the play at all:

"So sollte dieser Satz nicht als theoretische Lehre hervortreten, sondern als Richtschnur seines Handelns, die er nur auf die gegebene Veranlassung ausspricht, die sich aber in seinem hier in der Gegenwart und der Vergangenheit sich darstellenden Leben bewährt," (p. 41.)

Düntzer states expressly (p. 51 ff.) that granting that Lessing intended to represent his hero as opposed to all revealed religions, yet he contrived such a clever plot that the didactic element disappears in the back-ground and leaves a free, unhampered, dramatic movement. 'Nathan der Weise' is the dramatic story of the meeting of brother and sister who had been separated in their youth, under the auspices of a Jew endowed with wisdom and a large religious faith. The real centre of the action is the love of the Tempelherr for Recha, which suggests the events leading up to the conclusion. Thus we have a consistent action and living characters, a real drama. But, here again, the thought has suffered in the demonstration of the dramatic excellencies of the plot. Lessing is not writing a pure drama as is proved by the history of the play. Moreover, the action even as outlined is defective, since the character of Nathan is not developed by it, and the miraculous element is too prominent to make the action seem wholly probable. But our main difficulty is in believing that the thought is really so subordinate a part of the whole, that the Ring Story is nothing more than a chance episode which gives us a glimpse into the character of Nathan. The direct teaching of the play is too forceful and eloquent to be lost sight of.

The following interpretation of 'Nathan' has been attempted in the belief that the two elements in the work are not in opposition, but are closely and inseparably combined. It is not a case of a lame action overburdened by the thought, or of a brilliant plot which removes our interest in the underlying thought. The two are one. The thought suggests the action and is included in it.

Kuno Fischer, in his otherwise admirable interpretation of the Ring Story, fails in this, that he considers the final oneness of humanity to be the point of the fable, thus laying too little emphasis upon the personal element in the story. The former is the distant fruition, the latter is the present issue:

16 *Op. Cit.*, pp. 34–53, and 268 ff.

"Es eifre jeder seiner unbestochnen
Von Vorurtheilen freien Liebe nach!
Es strebe von euch jeder um die Wette,
Die Kraft des Steins in seinem Ring an Tag zu legen."

The true ring only exerted its magical virtue on the condition that its possessor wore it with full confidence in its strength:

"Und hatte die gemeine Kraft, vor Gott
Und Menschen angenehm zu machen, wer
In dieser Zuversicht ihn trug."

But this is no longer possible since two other rings exist, and all three are the gifts of a loving father, whom to doubt would be sin. There must be substituted for the faith in the ring itself, then, a determined effort to prove it genuine. We are thus led back to the first principle in Lessing's religious belief. The Ring Story is Lessing's theology epitomized. Religion rests in nothing upon the form of a man's belief, but depends wholly upon the moral activity of his nature. Lessing is dramatic even to his beliefs. A real love for humanity, an entire unselfishness in daily conduct, and a complete submission to the will of God, are the main features of his religious faith. Nathan, Lessing's religious ideal stands for all these things. Traditional Christianity often opposes these things, and, therefore, Lessing opposes traditional Christianity. Intolerance and bigotry are immoral. In so far as any religious system is intolerant and bigoted, it is immoral. Instead of trusting in the magic of any scheme of salvation we must prove by our upright living that our religion is genuine. It is easier to defend one's religion in word than in deed.

"Begreifst du aber
Wie viel andächtig schwärmen leichter als
Gut handeln ist?"

This is the one thought which runs all through Lessing's utterances on religion. In a letter written to his father, May 30th, 1749, thirty years before 'Nathan der Weise' was written, Lessing declares that Christianity is not something to be inherited from one's ancestors, and that to love one's enemy is a better proof of the reality of one's religion, than to repeat word for word the doctrines of the church. His Anti-Goeze papers are full of the same idea. His criticisms on the Bible are solely intended to prove that no book can be so inspired as to reveal to man a salvation which he must not struggle to obtain; and that a man may honestly struggle and obtain salvation, even without knowledge of that book. It is this tremendous ethical teaching, dramatic in its very nature, which he preaches at the end of his life from "his favorite pulpit, the stage."

If this be the teaching of the Ring Story, as it is the teaching of Lessing's life, it is plain what relation it bears to the action and to the characters in 'Nathan der Weise.' The action does not symbolize the oneness of humanity in bringing together Recha and Saladin and the Tempelherr, nor is the touching story told without any reference to an underlying idea. The action describes the struggle of men and women to realize for themselves a broad religious faith. The last scene does not prophetically describe the future union of all peoples in a human family; it gives us the assurance that those natures whose struggles and progress we had followed with such interest and concern, had won the victory over themselves and stood at last together, united by a single bond, inspired by a single purpose. The whole action leads up to this great consummation scene. Thus viewed, it is logical and direct. It represents the thought of the Ring Story dramatically wrought out in men's lives.

The relation of the different characters to the action is an interesting and fruitful study. We can only touch upon the main points. In the case of Nathan himself, the conflict has ceased before the play has opened. But he gives us the description of his own spiritual experience. He tells us of the awful furnace of affliction he has passed through, of the murder of his wife and children, of the eternal hatred he had sworn towards Christians:

"Doch nun kam die Vernunft allmählig wieder,
Sie sprach mit sanfter Stimme: Und doch ist Gott!
Doch war auch Gottes Rathschluss das! Wohlan!
Komm! übe das was du längst begriffen hast;
Was sicherlich zu üben schwerer nicht,
Als zu begreifen ist, wenn du nur willst.
Steh auf'!—Ich stand und rief zu Gott: ich will!
Willst du nur, dass ich will!"

There is little development of the character of Nathan in the play. The action is not found here. He has finished his race, and stands at

the goal toward which others are struggling.

With Nathan stands the pious Klosterbruder, and these are the stationary prophets of the Good. Opposite are placed Daja and the Patriarch. The contrast is complete. All that is religiously bigoted and intolerant and gross finds its complete expression in them. But between Nathan and the Klosterbruder on the one hand, and Daja and the Patriarch on the other, are the Tempelherr and Al Hafi. And in the struggle of these, and especially of the former, to attain a truly spiritual life, lies the heart of the drama. They see the strength and beauty of the character of Nathan, yet they are cramped by their environment and by their prejudices. With them there is constant endeavor to tear away from what is low, to raise themselves to a higher life. The love of the Tempelherr for Recha, his pride and prejudice which he learns to overcome, his relations with the Patriarch whom he begins by seeking and ends by despising, and with Nathan whom he begins by despising and learns to love, these are the steps which lead to his final triumph over self. What is true of the Tempelherr is true of Al Hafi, to a less degree. He reaches the height of the Klosterbruder, who sees in isolation the only safety of a pure life, but not the loftier plane of Nathan, or the Tempelherr, who have learned to conquer self in the world, and henceforth live for the world.

Saladin, Sittah and Recha, these are easily grouped. They all receive some impulse towards the Truth, either from the movings of human affection, or drawn by the words of Nathan. The struggle of man, be he Mohammedan, Jew or Christian, towards the truth, and that religion consists in life, not in form, this is at once the underlying idea of the play and the key to the action. This spiritual conflict arouses our warmest sympathies. The story of the Tempelherr is the Ring Story dramatized. It is the great world-drama of all human experience. For what is all spiritual life but the growth from smaller conceptions to larger, from petty views of Truth, as narrow as immediate environment, to the fullest idea of the Fatherhood of God, and the Brotherhood of Man?

RAYMOND CALKINS.

Iowa College.

THE SOURCE OF PEELE'S "ARRAIGNMENT OF PARIS."

ABOUT the year 1581 the children of the Chapel Royal presented the "Arraignment of Paris" at Court before the Queen. This drama is more of a masque than a play, and the plot is an admirably conceived piece of flattery of Elizabeth, the idea of which has heretofore been accredited to Peele. I transcribe Ward's brief synopsis:

"After, in the earlier part of the play, we have gone through the well-known story of Paris and Œnone, and the judgment of Paris between the contending goddesses, the novel element begins in the arraignment of Paris before Zeus and the tribunal of Olympus for having adjudged the apple of Ate to Venus. On the ground that the act was committed in the vicinity of a place sacred to Diana, the final judgment is committed to her hands, and she solves the difficulty by awarding the apple to none of the rivals, but to a gracious nymph 'whose name Eliza is' (whom Pallas, with appropriate readiness of wit, recognizes to be the same as she 'whom some Zabeta call')."[1]

Now the name, Zabeta, is that under which Elizabeth was celebrated by the poet George Gascoigne, dead then some seven years, in a masque so entitled, prepared at the instance of the Earl of Leicester as one of the series of pageants and entertainments at Kenilworth, 1575. The plot of this masque concludes with the descent of Iris as a messenger from Juno to the Queen, who is advised to cease following Diana, and promised a prolongation of her present happiness at Kenilworth "in wedded state."[2] We are not surprised to learn that this "shew" never "came to execution"; and it is more than likely that Elizabeth, learning the nature of its plot, as such things are not wont to be kept secret at court, stayed its performance, objecting to be thus courted in the face of the nation with allegorical similitudes. Gascoigne thus celebrates the excellence of Zabeta: Diana is speaking:

> "Zabeta, hyr whose excellencie was such
> In all respects of every qualitie,
> As gods themselves those gifts in her did grutch.
> My sister first, which Pallas hath to name,

1 Ward, 'Engl. Dram. Lit.,' i, 205.

2 "The Princelye Pleasures at Kenelworth." Hazlitt's 'Gascoigne', i, 123.